Sassafras albidum (Nutt.) Nees.  

My woodshop fills with the spicy aroma of sassafras as tawny shavings curl up and away from my antique wooden hand plane.

Only a skilled woodsmith will be able to distinguish my rich-grained work piece from golden oak, once it is fitted into the picture frame I am making. Beautiful, easily worked, and relatively inexpensive, sassafras lumber is gaining wide popularity among wood crafters.

What an ancient and versatile tree is the sassafras! Ancestors of the modern sassafrases shared the warm-wet forests of the Tertiary geological period with early redwoods, tulip-trees, magnolias, and sweet gums. Today only three species of sassafras survive in the world, one in central mainland China, one in Taiwan, and ours, which ranges widely over the eastern United States. Locked within our species are secrets gleaned during its 60 million year history, before the early French settlers applied their version of the euphonious name by which aboriginal Americans called the tree.

Best known of its uses is the refreshing tea which derives its flavor from the safrole which is steeped from the fresh bark of large roots. As soon as frost left the ground in late February or early March, my father always grubbed out several dark red roots to flavor the ruddy brew we used as a spring tonic to thin the blood "so we would be in shape for spring farm work." Our pioneer ancestors recognized both red and white varieties of sassafras, and believed that roots from red sassafras (variety molle from the pubescent leaves) made the best tea. We sipped the spicy tea as we sat around the wood stove on blustery evenings of late winter, unaware that one day someone would find it contained a possible carcinogen. Most likely we would not have stopped drinking it had we known.

Sassafras belongs to the Lauraceae, the aromatic laurel family of higher plants. One of its cousins produces the avocado; another yields cinnamon and camphor. Spicebush, with its glossy green leaves and scarlet berries, is a common shrub in mesic Indiana woodlands and was once used as a substitute for allspice. Dried sassafras leaves are the file used in the southern dish file gumbo. Oil of sassafras, once an ingredient in patent medicines, is still used in the preparation of certain soaps, perfumes, and cosmetics. A Mediterranean cousin, Laurus nobilis, is the source of culinary bay leaves as well as the leafy laurel branches once woven into garlands to crown successful poets and athletes in ancient Greece and Rome.

Although "resting on one’s laurels" is not a good practice, a slender sassafras pole makes a near-ideal walking staff. Its springiness, light weight, and durability—the qualities which also made it a much-used wood by American pioneers—will improve your footing in rough terrain for years. Easily riven with a hickory-handled froe and an ironwood beetle, young trees were once a favorite for shingles, slats, and fence pickets. Its durability in contact with soil and the ease with which it is split were properties sought for use in fence posts and rails. The pioneers boasted that well-seasoned sassafras posts would outlast three post holes!

Coopers hand-shaved sassafras staves for making wooden water pails and kegs. Hay frames for wooden-wheeled farm wagons on horse-powered farms were often made of sassafras lumber because of its strength and its light weight for ease in exchanging wagon beds. The best booming pole, to anchor fast the loose hay, wheat bundles, or corn fodder during hauling, was also made from a seasoned sassafras sapling.

Little need to plant a sassafras tree, even though its cinnamon-tinged bark, lemon-colored pom pom flowers, varied leaves, and showy fruits make it a lovely ornamental. In fact, farmers consider it a "weed" tree. Throughout the tree’s native range, during autumn song birds plant, in every fencerow and untended field border, the glossy purple fruits which they eagerly pluck from the tree’s bright vermilion egg-cup receptacles. If left alone, the seedlings will soon sprout into large colonies, which become blazing burnt orange copes in later autumn. Individual seedlings, however, usually

Courtesy of Ohio DNR.
are transplanted with difficulty; since their root development is sparse, survival rates are low.

Sassafras typically does not grow to great size, although some very large specimens are on record. Charles Deam had a photograph in his *Trees of Indiana* of a man standing inside a hollow stump of a Jennings County specimen. In life that tree must well have exceeded four feet in diameter because it still measured 48 inches dbh nearly 50 years after it was cut in 1866. A fine old tree that I measured in Versailles State Park in 1967 was 29 inches in diameter and had a clear bole of 44 feet. Some forest-grown individuals in the old-growth section of Hoot Woods in Owen County were about 24 inches dbh, with clear boles of 50 to 60 feet. Since sassafras is intolerant of deep shade, these trees undoubtedly began growth in canopy openings decades earlier.

The varied leaf shapes are the tree’s trademark—in fact, its Latin name was once *Sassafras variifolium*. How does the tree “know” when and how to make a simple oval leaf form, a single left-handed or right-handed mitten or the curious double mitten? And what selective advantage does variation in leaf shape convey to the sassafras? I am not sure any botanist has ever answered those questions completely. Perhaps some mysteries of nature should remain mysteries.

Black swallow-wort
(*Vincetoxicum nigrum*,
*syn. Cynanchum nigrum*)

Have you seen this invasive plant? Black swallow-wort is known from only two places in Indiana—a backyard in Indianapolis and at Hayes Arboretum near Richmond. However, it was introduced to North America from southwest Europe around 1900 as an ornamental, so there are likely other plantings out there in Indiana.

Why are we watching for black swallow-wort? In the east it has become an aggressive invader, primarily on roadsides and disturbed sites, but also moving into forestlands and prairies. The vine crawls over other vegetation, forming a dense, impenetrable thicket (another common name for the species is “dog strangling vine”). A University of Rhode Island student, Jennifer Dacey, found that monarch butterflies will lay eggs on this member of the milkweed family but that all the larvae die because swallow-wort has a different toxicology than members of the genus Asclepias. Once established, this species is very difficult to kill, so we want to nip this one in the bud.

What to look for:

Black swallow-wort is an herbaceous, perennial vine in the milkweed family. It has dark, glossy-green, simple leaves with a rounded to slightly heart-shaped base, smooth edges, tapered point, and very short petioles.

The deep purple flowers are small (1/8-inch across), borne in clusters at leaf axils, and have triangular petals with short white hairs. It blooms from May to August. The fruit typically grows in pairs and resembles slender milkweed pods. Like that of native milkweeds, the seed is winged and readily spread by the wind.

Black swallow-wort may be confused with a common native vining plant often found in disturbed areas, called sandvine (*Cynanchum laeve*). Sandvine, however, has small white flowers and deeply heart-shaped leaf bases.

What to do if you find it:

Report any finds to Becky Dolan at rdolan@butler.edu. To assure identification, a good photo of the plant and the flowers (preferably showing the hairs) is necessary. For more information and photos, see the INPAWS website at www.inpaws.org.